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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 007436

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PM FOR DAS COULTER, NEA FOR DAS DANIN, NEA/ELA FOR
DONICK/SONTY

E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/17/2016

TAGS: FR KDEM LE MARR PGOV PREL SY

SUBJECT: FRENCH MOD COORDINATOR FOR MILITARY ASSISTANCE TO
LEBANON ENVISIONS COOPERATION WITH USG

Classified By: POL Deputy Bruce Turner, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Vice-Admiral Jean-Marie Van Huffel, France's Coordinator for Military Assistance to Lebanon, told Emboffs November 17 that he looks forward to cooperating with the USG on meeting the equipment needs of the Lebanese Armed Forces. He spoke highly of his Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) counterpart, General George El-Hecham. Van Huffel said he planned to visit Washington within the next two weeks. End summary.

¶2. (C) Embassy PolMiloff and NEA Watcher met on November 17 with Vice-Admiral Jean-Marie Van Huffel to discuss military assistance for Lebanon. Van Huffel, who previously commanded the French Navy's Mediterranean Squadron (2003-2006), praised the close working relationship between France and the United States on questions regarding Lebanon, and said he looked forward to cooperating with the USG in his new assignment, although he repeatedly stressed the need for Lebanon to be in the driver's seat. "The Lebanese must tell us what they need, and take charge of coordinating their own requests to donor states," said Van Huffel, who added that his own mission was to then "coordinate, accelerate, and increase" bilateral French military assistance to the LAF.

Dealing with the LAF

¶3. (C) Van Huffel said he recently visited Lebanon, where he met with Prime Minister Siniora, Defense Minister Murr, and the LAF's Chiefs of Staff. On the basis of those discussions, he assessed that Hizballah was "not fiercely

opposed" to the LAF, in part because Hizballah was confident of retaining the upper hand in terms of armament. He sensed that PM Siniora was genuinely concerned about how to tackle the disarmament of Hizballah, which Van Huffel characterized as "a veritable army." Van Huffel was pleased that Defense Minister Murr quickly responded to a request from French Defense Minister Alliot-Marie by appointing General George El-Hecham to be Van Huffel's counterpart in the LAF. Van Huffel said he and El-Hecham had established effective communication.

¶4. (C) Nevertheless, Van Huffel expressed several concerns. He said that in his initial discussions in Beirut, LAF officers evinced confusion about who was authorized in the GOL to make decisions -- especially decisions with financial implications. In addition, he found some LAF requests to be financially unrealistic and strategically unnecessary. The Lebanese Navy, for example, gave France a sweeping wish list aimed at building a fleet larger than Lebanon needed or could hope to sustain. By the same token, years of budgetary neglect meant that not only had many of Lebanon's existing weapons systems been mothballed, but that the LAF had also lost the organizational capacity to operate and maintain them. For example, in speaking to an LAF procurement official about repairing Lebanon's neglected helicopter fleet, it quickly became apparent to Van Huffel that the official had given no thought to the numbers of mechanics, pilots, and other personnel who would need to be trained (or retrained) in order to resume flight operations. Finally, he expressed concern that the LAF had done a relatively poor job thus far of prioritizing its training and equipment needs and of speaking to donors with one voice (he noted, for example, that he was surprised to learn during his visit that the LAF was seeking sophisticated radar systems from Germany). Such ad hoc requests betrayed a lack of discipline and internal coordination, in Van Huffel's view.

The LAF's Needs

¶5. (C) Van Huffel said the LAF's top two priorities were weapons and mobility. With respect to weapons, he said the Lebanese had expressed great interest in anti-aircraft systems. The French were cool to this idea, suggesting the Lebanese be "prudent." With regard to mobility, Van Huffel said he understood the LAF hoped to obtain several hundred surplus Humvees from the US. France would help on mobility primarily by assisting the LAF to put many of its inoperative armored vehicles back into service. He noted that the Lebanese were also interested in obtaining small attack helicopters armed with cannons, which Van Huffel thought would be useful in detecting/deterring arms smuggling while not posing a serious threat to Israel. Van Huffel suggested that France likely would not be able to help with helicopter donations, given the limitations of its own helicopter fleet.

¶6. (C) Van Huffel concluded by saying he hoped to visit Washington and New York within the next 10-14 days, and asked for suggestions on who he should try to see. He said he looked forward to his scheduled telcon with PM DAS Mike Coulter on November 21, and expressed interest in learning the outcome of CENTCOM's survey of the LAF's Training & Equipment needs. He noted that, following his trip to the United States, he plans to visit a number of Gulf States to encourage financial support for the LAF's T&E needs.

Comment

¶7. (C) Comment: In contrast to his counterparts at the MFA (who have been markedly skittish on this question), Van Huffel seemed to welcome the prospect of further coordination with USG officials. Emboffs will be in e-mail contact with the appropriate offices in PM, DOD, and NEA to ensure that Van Huffel sees the right interlocutors in Washington and New York.

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